

A
SYNOPSIS
OF THE

TOWN OF SURF CITY LAND USE PLAN

Submitted To

North Carolina Coastal Resources Commission

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LAND USE CONDITIONS AND TRENDS

The Town of Surf City is located in the center of Topsail Island, a barrier island composed of beaches, dunes, maritime forests, and estuarine marshes and waterways. The economy and land use in the Town have traditionally been shaped by the outdoor vacation activities occurring between May 1 and Labor Day. Surf City was incorporated in 1948 at the beginning of this nation's period of increased affluence and leisure time. The wide beaches and waterways, scenic vistas and recreation activities were the "calling card" used to encourage people to locate in the Town. The image was attractive and lots were sold to where the Town now houses over 700 year-round residents and as many as 5,000 vacationers at the height of the tourist season.

But the rapid, unplanned growth has resulted in problems that now cause resident and non-resident property owners alike to question the direction of development. Subdivision of land to accommodate second home building and commercial support facilities occurred so rapidly that few parcels of undeveloped land remain. The high demand for beach area land has caused prices per acre to rise and marketable lot sizes to decrease. The wide open spaces that attracted people are diminishing and being replaced by traffic congestion, beach litter, and high density development. Scenic vistas are obstructed by signs and utility poles, and waterways polluted from malfunctioning septic tanks.

The economy of Surf City, as well as the land use, remains strongly tourist-oriented. But with an increase in municipal services and in employment opportunities near the island,

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increase in commuting population as well as retired persons. As much as half the permanent resident population now relies on the tourist trade, and favors continued increase in population size and economic development. The other half, however, moved there because of the open spaces and natural resources and would prefer very limited growth of commerce and more protection of the Town's areas of natural and scenic value.

The land use patterns now found in the Town were initiated somewhat by military activities which immediately preceded private development. Military use of Topsail Island as a missile test facility lasted less than 8 years; long enough for construction of numerous buildings, a bridge, and a skeletal grid road system and public water supply. The bridge, most importantly, gave access to the mainland, and waterlines and buildings were adapted for public and private use. The main road extending the length of the island was located immediately behind the frontal dune system; it served as the backbone for future land subdivision, and was adopted as the Town's main thoroughfare. The road's location dictated the depth of many oceanfront lots and to a certain extent, the location of houses on those lots.

Development patterns that can safely be accommodated in Surf City are limited by certain physical conditions of the land. With the exception of some higher foredunes, the entire Town is designated a Flood Prone Area, subject to inundation during severe hurricanes. The risk of storm damage and loss of property to erosion is high

along barrier islands. But public and private losses can be minimized by proper location of roads and structures and by care taken to prevent damage to natural protective features such as sand dunes. The effectiveness of septic tanks as a method of sewage disposal in beach soils decreases with increasing population density. Sewage effluent from poorly located and improperly functioning septic tanks poses a threat to both underlying ground-water supplies and adjacent estuarine waters and marshes.

The Town now has a zoning ordinance to guide development, and has adopted the N. C. State Building Code as its standard for construction. But commercial and residential buildings, old and new, are scattered and intermingled with motels and trailer parks. There is little uniformity in size, design or quality to integrate these components into a workable whole. There is consensus in the Town among residents and non-residents alike that unsightly development is the major problem at present and that a new image of clutter has replaced the former image of natural beauty.

The purpose of the Surf City Land Use Plan was to assess the land use problems now present in the Town, search for possible solutions, ask of the Townspeople what changes they want in the future and derive a process to achieve desired objectives. Behind the clutter, much of the value of natural, economic and recreation resources still remains; some of that which is lost can be regained. The beauty of the island's maritime forest is unsurpassed on the N. C. coast. The foredune system, where not destroyed by construction activities, is solid and stable, offering at least temporary

protection to the property behind it. The beaches and waterways hold yet undeveloped recreation potential for both permanent residents and vacationers, and the relaxed atmosphere of an ocean resort still prevails among the Townspeople.

MAJOR LAND USE ISSUES AND PROBLEMS

The amount of population growth that can be accommodated, the extent of changes in the quality and kinds of development that the Town will be able to initiate, and the extent to which new policies can be implemented in the future are limited initially by three major factors: 1) the land's physical capacity for development, 2) the low tax base, and 3) the existing land use and ownership patterns.

1. Within the town limits there are approximately 550 acres of non-marsh or beach land suitable for development. About half of that land is already built upon at densities which vary substantially in different parts of the Town; much of the remaining land has been subdivided into individual lots.

Since public waterlines now extend throughout the Town (though an undetermined number of structures still utilize private water supply wells) the main limiting factor for future development is sewage disposal. The soils in the Town have severe limitations for septic tanks. Problems with septic tanks are already much in evidence; shellfish waters have been closed to harvesting and groundwater sources found to be polluted. Some of the pollution encountered can be attributed to sources outside the Town, and there are many areas within the Town either undeveloped or developed at such low densities that pollution problems could not be attributed to them without further study. Thus, if the existing population were distributed more evenly and there had not been pollution coming from outside the

jurisdiction, the current pollution problems could possibly have been avoided. For that reason, it is probable that some additional growth in some parts of the Town could safely be accommodated with septic tanks if maintained at sufficiently low densities. Solutions to the pollution problems in already overcrowded areas, however, have yet to be found; for that reason, population growth in these areas may have to be curtailed.

2. The low property tax base resulting from non-industrial low density development limits the revenues available to the Town to finance implementation and enforcement of new policies and to develop new public facilities to service its population. Federal and state grant monies can sometimes be obtained to assist in development of major service facilities, such as sewer and water, and to plan for establishment of others, such as public recreational areas; but currently the availability of outside funding is uncertain at best. The Town in the end must manage and operate municipal services, and management and operation require reliable sources of financial support and professional manpower. New and improved municipal activities, therefore, will depend on both the availability of financial assistance and the amount that people are willing to pay to achieve desired goals.

3. The existing land use and ownership patterns in Surf City dictate to a certain extent future land use conditions, as existing densities, lot sizes and construction techniques were legally approved at the time of their establishment. Hindsight may teach that some public approvals were not made in what now seems to be the Town's best interest; but hindsight does not validate retroactive decision-making. Likewise, public adoption of the existing grid road and waterline pattern, deemed the most cost effective route to take at the time, may now be contributing to the unsightliness of

development. New construction, lot sizes, and building and road locations can be controlled and non-conforming land uses can gradually be decreased over time; but the visual impact of such changes may well be slow in appearing.

In the course of the public participation program, numerous other land use problems surfaced. The drawbridge connecting the Town to the mainland is located at the center of Town. Traffic into and out of Surf City and the adjacent jurisdictions must pass through the commercial area in order to reach the bridge. Traffic congestion and hazards are augmented by frequent opening of the bridge to allow for the passage of boats; on summer weekends cars often line up waiting for the bridge to close.

Recreation activities, though scattered, tend to concentrate toward the center of Town; but there are no sidewalks to accommodate pedestrian traffic and there are few parking areas near the beaches. Parking on road shoulders, particularly N. C. 50, increases the risk of accidents, with children darting across the road to reach adjacent beaches. The lack of paved shoulders limits the feasibility of bicycle traffic, especially during the tourist season when bicycle use would otherwise be heaviest.

Access to beaches is a problem for visitors and owners of inland lots and usually necessitates trespassing by way of paths cut through the dunes. Public access is provided on cross-island street rights-of-way, but rights-of-way are unmarked and, even there, no structural pathways are provided. There are no public boat launching ramps to facilitate use of the waterways, and again, public access is limited and endangers the value of the marsh.

The use of motor vehicles on the beaches is an issue on which the Town's population is divided. Surf fishermen often drive along the beach to find the best spots to fish. Their use of the beach is only a real

problem during summer when it conflicts with swimming. But to some people, driving along the beach is a recreational activity itself, often accompanied by continued dune crossing to test the ability of a vehicle. For whatever use is involved, there are no ramps for crossing the dune, and severe erosion damage can be initiated by destruction of vegetative covering.

DEVELOPMENT OF GROWTH GOALS

While formal land use planning activities in Surf City were initiated by State passage of the Coastal Area Management Act, many Townspeople were already active in trying to solve municipal problems. A citizens' group had been organized to work for the betterment of the Town, and became involved in the planning process as one representative of public opinion.

But the majority of the Town's taxpayers are absentee property owners, unable to attend many local public meetings. In order to evaluate the widest possible range of public sentiment, the Town formulated questionnaires and mailed them to all taxpayers on record. Questions concerned problems and advantages of the Town, desired growth rates and means of accommodating growth, and possible means of achieving goals in the future. Responses to the questionnaire were received from about 25 percent of the taxpayers. There was a large degree of unanimity concerning problems in the Town; unsightly development ranked highest, followed by lack of shopping areas and septic tank problems. The availability of natural recreation resources was considered the major advantage including closeness to beaches, clean air and water, uncrowded living conditions and outdoor activities. Unanimity dissolved, however, in the desires for future growth, with virtually an even split between those wanting slow and those wanting rapid growth. Annexation of additional land was proposed to accommodate increased population, and effective regulations were suggested to control commercial activity.

There was consensus among the taxpayers, resident and nonresident alike, that future growth be planned to achieve a family-oriented resort area. Respondents stated a need for better enforcement of the Town's zoning regulations and building code, and for better municipal facilities, particularly water supply and public recreation areas.

In order to evaluate what was meant by "slow growth" and "rapid growth," development alternatives were presented at public meetings. Five models of development, each feasible in light of physical and economic restraints, with associated density distributions and population levels were formulated. Densities ranged from only 3 units per acre throughout the Town to as much as 15 to 30 units per acre over 30 percent of the Town. The associated peak summer populations ranged from about 6,500 to 10,200. In light of questionnaire responses Town government chose to recommend a mixture of low to medium density with an ultimate peak summer population of about 7,700. All future planning for service facilities in the Town and land use ordinances and regulations will be aimed at achieving that ultimate population in 2000. Also in light of questionnaire responses and public meetings, the Town adopted the following Objectives and Standards to guide future growth.

Objective: It is to be the policy of Surf City to encourage continued development of the Town as a family beach.

Standards: 1. Community services, including facilities for water supply and sewage treatment, road construction and maintenance, and police and fire protection will be planned for a peak summer population in 1985 of 6,570 and a year-round population of 960.

2. The development of a variety of commercial recreation and shopping facilities will be encouraged in the business district and along the causeway in order both to meet the demands of vacationing and permanent populations and to increase employment opportunities for permanent residents.
3. The construction of a variety of housing types limited to 3 stories from ground level (including single family, duplex, apartment, motel and condominium) will be encouraged, in order to accommodate residents and vacationers with differing economic resources and needs.
4. In order to meet the demand for increased shopping and recreational areas, the Town will consider annexation of land needed between the AIWW and US 17.
5. The Town will approve the establishment of a Chamber of Commerce to promote the Town as an enjoyable recreation center.

Objective: It will be the policy of Surf City to promote that quality of development which will offer the maximum reasonable enhancement of the natural and economic resources of the Town.

Standards: 1. The Town will require strict adherence to the zoning ordinance, the minimum standards of the State building code (with windstorm) and will establish ordinances necessary to protect the esthetic and protective nature of the dune system.

2. In order to alleviate any possible pollution of estuarine or ground-waters, the Town will promote the development of a regional public sewage system and will require connection to the system upon its establishment.
3. In order to maximize the value of the maritime forest, special land use regulations such as a Planned Unit Development ordinance will be enacted for the forested parts of the Town.
4. The Town will seek assistance in defining the historic value of observation towers left from military activities and in developing one tower into a historic museum.
5. In order to alleviate traffic congestion and hazards, the N. C. Department of Transportation and the Corps of Engineers will be requested to establish regular intervals for opening the drawbridge.
6. Parking areas will be established along cross-island street rights-of-way and parking will be prohibited along NC 50.

Objective: It will be the policy of Surf City to promote the safe and enjoyable utilization of the Town's recreational resources.

Standards: 1. The Town favors establishment of a balanced recreational program for residents and vacationers. In order to promote recreational use of its waterways, the Town will seek development of boat launching ramps and a marina along the causeway. Other recreation needs will be met as feasible by developing a municipal park complex and an active recreation service program.

2. The use of motorized vehicles on the beach strand will be regulated by ordinance; the crossing of dunes by motor vehicles will be restricted to a specially constructed ramp.
3. Efforts will be made in road alignment and construction to accommodate safe bicycle and pedestrian traffic particularly in the vicinity of recreation facilities.
4. The Town will make efforts to reduce the incidence of beach litter and will establish a beach clean-up program.
5. It will be a function of the Town to ensure that reasonable access to the ocean and sound waters of the Town be available to the public. The developers of new subdivisions will provide rights-of-way and adequate structural access to adjacent watercourses. Such structures and rights-of-way when acceptable to Town, will thereafter be maintained by the Town, and designated as public accessways by appropriate signs. When the number of accessways becomes adequate to serve the public, public access will be restricted to those designated areas.

AREAS OF ENVIRONMENTAL CONCERN

The Town of Surf City has identified certain areas in the Town whose particularly fragile, scenic or hazardous nature warrants special care taken in their use and development. For this reason, specific standards for development in each of these Areas of Environmental Concern have been established, and are summarized as follows:

The Estuarine System

(The estuarine waters, marshes and mudflats, as defined by G. S. 113-229 and G. S. 113-230)

The only kinds of new development that may be allowed in the estuarine system are those that require water access and cannot function anywhere else. Piers, docks and marinas, for instance, connecting water oriented with upland activities, may be considered appropriate if their need in the area can be demonstrated and their specific location and design shown to be the most suitable alternative.

The Estuarine System category includes all islands within the marsh complex; however, since some of these islands could accommodate some degree of development, proposed development of any of them will be reviewed on a case by case basis.

The Beach-Foredune System

Because of the dynamic nature of the beach-foredune complex, the construction or location of structures on it will not be permitted. Allowances will be made, however, for the provision of structural accessways across the dune provided that utmost care is exercised in their location and construction to prevent damage to the dune and the vegetation growing on it. Allowances will also be made for the erection of safety facilities such as lifeguard chairs, and for necessarily water-oriented recreational structures such as fishing piers.

Hazard Areas

Oceanfront property with a high probability of incurring excessive erosion is considered an unsuitable location for the placement of structures used for housing, institutional purposes, transportation or commerce, and, therefore, of too high a risk to warrant further public investments into roads, sewer and water lines and other such facilities. In this area, as in coastal flood prone areas, any construction will be required to meet at least the minimum standards of the N. C. Building Code and conform to the standards of the Federal Insurance Administration for coastal high hazard areas.

Public Trust Areas

To the degree authorized by statute, the town will require some provision for public access in new developments in Public Trust Areas and will prohibit any development which unduly restricts public access to and use of these areas.

LAND USE PROGRAM

The land use program for future development in Surf City can be divided into the following three components:

1. Land Classification

The Surf City Land Classification map defines those areas of the Town suitable for development (Transitional) and those of a particularly hazardous nature or with special natural and scenic resource value where development would run contrary to the goals and objectives of the Town (Conservation). Public facilities including water and sewer lines and street maintenance operations will service only those areas of the jurisdiction within the Transitional area (and areas annexed in the future that warrant the Transitional Designation). The Land Classification map also defines those areas of Transitional land where particular kinds of development (i.e., Planned Unit Development, recreation, shopping, residential) will be encouraged.

The Town will aim for the eventual distribution of population within the Transitional area at the following overall densities:

Low density (3 units per acre) - 50 percent

Medium-low density (5 units per acre) - 25 percent

Medium density (10 units per acre) - 25 percent

The Town will encourage more creative land subdivision techniques, such as clustered housing, but will prohibit the erection of high rise (over 3 stories from ground level) structures.

2. Public service provision

Priorities have been set for new and improved public services. The municipal water supply is being analyzed and its

quality and adequacy for future populations studied; the water distribution system will be revamped toward the end of allowing and requiring connection to the public system of all new and existing sanitary facilities. The feasibility of establishing a regional sewerage system is currently under study with participation in such a system actively supported by the Town Board.

The Town will seek development of new public and improved commercial recreation facilities, as requested in questionnaire responses, as soon as financially feasible. Assistance from the State Department of Archives and History will be requested in determining the historic significance of old military observation towers.

3. Implementation

The Town recognizes the need for revision of existing municipal ordinances and wider circulation of their requirements to the public. New ordinances will be established where necessary to implement the plan, assure better protection of natural resources, and reduce storm, and erosion damage. In particular, the density of development, the protection of the esthetic and protective nature of sand dunes and the maritime forest, safe and enjoyable public use of the beaches, the provision of adequate structural access to Public Trust areas, and the quality of construction will be subject to municipal regulation in the future.

The Town of Surf City will request permission from the Coastal Resources Commission (CRC) to be the permit-letting authority for minor development permits that will be required in Areas of Environmental Concern. The Town will prepare a Local Management Program, as required by the CRC, describing the methods that will be used to coordinate existing municipal permit-letting procedures with those that will be necessary to implement the Plan. The Town will also seek to coordinate its permit-letting authority

with that of Pender County.

The Surf City Land Use Plan has been closely coordinated with provisions and policies of the Pender County Plan. In order to make land use planning in Surf City an on-going, effective process, the Town Board, at its regular monthly meetings and at special meetings as needed, will consider orderly and prompt upgrading and revision of the Land Use Plan. Surf City will continue to coordinate its planning efforts with the County, especially those concerning the establishment of new land use regulatory bodies, service facilities and economic development.

This Synopsis of the Surf City Land Use Plan is being mailed to all property owners in the Town. Copies of the full plan, which addresses each of the items included here in detail, are available for study in the Town Hall and can be obtained at cost upon written request. Additional copies of the Synopsis and its maps can be obtained from the Town Hall free of charge upon request.

In the final analysis, improvement of the overall image of the Town will require conscientious cooperative efforts on the part of all residents and property owners. There are no easy solutions to some problems, especially where Town opinion is divided on desired courses of action. But all Townspeople stand to benefit from better visual, health and safety quality and from public efforts to provide to residents and vacationers an enjoyable, prosperous resort community.

Addendum

The Town of Surf City's commitment to distribute the Synopsis and make copies available upon request is based on the assumptions that

- 1) The N. C. Department of Natural and Economic Resources will bear the cost of printing the Synopsis and
- 2) some financial assistance will be available to the Town to cover the cost of mailing.

Should either of the above assumptions prove invalid, the Town will be forced to re-evaluate its commitment.

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